

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 16

STAGE LEFT

STAGE RIGHT

Mr. Washington was trying to get us into a serious mood again when we came back to school after Thanksgiving.

"Everyone quiet," he shouted as we ran into the auditorium for rehearsal. "I have some important news."

One boy wasn't listening. He dashed to the stage. Mr. Washington practically dragged him off. "I said, 'Sit down!'"

Lavinia nudged me. "The man is beginning to act like the teachers here."

"He's beginning to look tired like them too," I said.

Mr. Washington banged a ruler on the stage. "Now people, we only have a few weeks before show time. You gotta get yourselves together." He leaned against the stage. A blotch of white paint stained his jeans. "I've invited the press to come and see you the night of the play. We might get some coverage on TV and in some local papers."

Everyone talked at once. He held up his hands.

Then he jumped up onto the stage. "I told them that there was a lot of talent here at Dunbar Elementary. Now you folks aren't going to make me look like a liar, are you?"

"No!" we yelled:

"We'll give them a show they'll never forget," T.T. shouted. He wasn't even in it.

Mr. Washington started walking off the stage. "We have a lot of work to do, folks. Take your places. Mickey, Marcia and Lavinia, stage left. Dotty, Russell, stage right."

Dotty started walking to her left. Mr. Washington shouted, "Dotty, pay attention. I said, 'Stage right'!"

She bent over and hobbled to the right like an old woman.

Everyone was messing up, and people's nerves was getting frazzled. But Mr. Washington didn't give up on us.

The next day we ate lunch in the auditorium so we could continue preparing for the play. I worked on the poem and made up two lines:

We have two gifts for you tonight Not the store-bought kind

Mr. Washington looked over my shoulder. "That's sounding good. Say something about joy and laughter — our gifts to the audience," he said. "Bird is going to do a fine job in this play."

I put my pen down. "Do you think he could get back in our class?"

"I'm going to speak to your teacher. You've really helped him a lot. You gave him a lot of confidence, Doris. He thinks the sun rises and sets on you."

"Bird just silly sometimes," I said looking down on my paper.

Mr. Washington walked up to the stage to help T.T. hang a large wreath as I wrote the last line of my poem.

When we went back to rehearsal after school, Mr. Washington told me he liked the poem I wrote. "Do you think you can teach it to those little ones?" He pointed to a group of kindergartners.

"What about Bird?"

"I think he can hold his own now." He brought the kids over to me.

"They're all yours, Doris."

"Mr. Washington, how do I ... ?"

A big crash interrupted me. A cardboard prop building fell on T.T.'s head, but he wasn't hurt. Mr. Washington ran to the stage, and the kids looked up at me like I was their teacher.

"Hi," I said.

One tiny boy with a very serious face said, "Is the play tomorrow?"

"No," I laughed.

"When is it?"

"A few weeks."

"Is that a long time?"

I heard Russell still missing lines. "No. Not long enough."

A girl with two dancing braids took my arm. "Am I gonna be in it too?"

"And me?" Another girl asked.

"And me too?" a boy yelled.

"Okay, okay. Calm down. Now, I want everyone to repeat after me. 'We have two gifts for you tonight.'"

They yelled, "We have two gifts for you tonight!" Then a boy with his thumb in his mouth finished after everyone else. "For you tonight," he said.

"Not the store-bought kind," I spoke very slowly.

"Not the store-bought kind!" they shouted.

"Bought kind," the same boy trailed behind.

This wasn't working. I had to think of something else. "Hey, I got it." I pointed to the girl with braids and the serious boy.

I kneeled down and placed my hands on the boy's shoulders. "You recite the first line." I turned to the girl. "And you recite the second."

Each kid would recite one line of the poem, and everyone would recite the last two lines. I wrote out a line for each of them so they could practice it with someone at home. The girl with the dancing braids said, "This is homework?"

"Yes. Very important homework."

Those children wore me out. It was like having ten Gerald's.

Bird and I practiced the play again that evening at my house, but he was still forgetting lines and not even reading the words he already knew.

"What's wrong with you?"

"I can't help it, Doris. I don't think I can be in the play," he said.

"What?"

"I can't do it. I know I can't." He balled his fist so hard his knuckles looked white.

"How can you back out now?"

"Anyone can do it. You could do my part." He loosened his fist, and his hand shook as he picked up the script. "I can't, Doris. I'll ruin the whole thing."

"You'll ruin it if you back out."

"Suppose I forget my lines and look stupid in front of all those people?"

"You'll look more stupid if you don't do it. You have a chance to go back to our class, maybe."

"I'm dumb."

"Bird, if you was dumb, you wouldn't be my best friend."

He was speechless for a minute. "I'm your best friend? You're my best friend, but I didn't know I was yours too." He stared straight ahead. "You sure you don't think I'll mess up?"

"If you forget a line, I'll be behind the curtain or in one of the crowd scenes, and I can tell you."

"I been good in that class. I thought by now I could come back to 6-3. Even the teachers kept saying how surprised they are that I know all the work in that special class."

"Bird, Mr. Washington is going to talk to Barker. When we come back to school after the holidays, I know you'll be back in our class."

"Okay, Doris. I won't back out now, that would be a dirty thing to do."

Rehearsal was a little calmer the next day. Bird remembered more of his lines and what he didn't remember he made up. My kindergarten kids knew the poem perfectly. They were better than the older kids.

The stage was looking like the inside of a tenement building. T.T. was a pretty good artist. He'd made most of the scenery, and Lavinia — we were sure she was going straight from Dunbar Elementary School to Hollywood.

The school began to feel like a party was coming. Even Barker smiled a few times. Every classroom was decorated with paper pine trees and tinsel.

This was a happy time for all of us, because the silliest things seemed special. Like the dusty, plastic wreath with one sprig of holly that the super hung on the building entrance every year.

Ma always threatened to burn that wreath, but I liked it because it was a sign that Christmas was coming.

When I got home from rehearsal one afternoon, Ma handed me an envelope. "You have an early Christmas present," she said. "From your buddy upstate."

I was surprised and happy to hear from Amir.

December 15th

Dear Doris,

I was glad to get your letter. I hope you are still fine. A lot of things been happening to me and that's why I took so long to answer your letter. I'll be living with the Smiths. They are adopting my brother and I'll live with them as a foster son.

You know I told you I never wanted to live with another family again. The Smiths are different though, from all the families I been with. They treat me like a real member of the family – a son. Mr. Smith said I should call him Dad and his wife Mom when I felt comfortable enough. I can't say it yet. Guess it's been so long since I had anyone to call Dad and Mom. But my brother calls them that; well, he's officially their son. I guess in a while I'll be able to say it too.

Mr. Smith promised that he's going to help me locate my other sisters and brothers. And one day he's going to bring me to the Bronx to visit my other family – you and Bird and the rest of the 163rd Street gang. I call you–all my other family. And if any of you want

to come up here to visit later on, they said there is plenty of room.

I wish I could come down there for the play. I know it's going to be something else with Bird and Russell and all of them in it. Tell me all about it when you write again.

I'm real glad you helped Bird. I knew you could do it. He's one of the best people I know. You are too, Doris. Tell him and everyone else I said hello.

You and your family have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I still miss you, Doris. And I'm glad you keep writing to me. Write again soon.

Love, Amir

He also made a beautiful Christmas card of a winter scene — A pretty Black girl, hanging a wreath in front of a building that looked like my building on a block that looked like 163rd Street.

I ran into the kitchen. "Ma, look at this beautiful card Amir made."

She was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the paper. "My goodness Doris, if you grin any wider your face will crack."

"Oh, Ma," I leaned on her shoulder and put the card on the table.

"That is beautiful. I think that girl looks a little like you."

She looked at the paper again, and handed me the card. "I hope you're not going to get moody on us again."

"What you mean, Ma? Me and Amir always be friends even if he ain't here."

She closed the paper. "Well, you finally got yourself together. Y'all ready for that play?"

I laughed. "I better be. Mr. Washington said, 'Ready or not, the play opens tomorrow.' "